DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 371 285 CG 025 576

AUTHOR Abood, Faye
TITLE Improving Parental Coping Skills during the Adjustment Period: A Model Divorce Education Program.
PUB DATE 94
NOTE 64p.; Ed.D. Practicum, Nova Southeastern University.
PUB TYPE Dissertations/Theses - Practicum Papers (043)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC03 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Anger; *Child Rearing; *Conflict Resolution; *Daily Living Skills; *Divorce; Emotional Adjustment; Family Problems; One Parent Family; *Parent Child Relationship; *Parenting Skills; Problem Solving; Resources; Stress Management; Well Being

ABSTRACT

The design of this practicum was to address the problem of parents obtaining a divorce who did not possess coping skills and who sometimes misdirected their frustration and anger at their children. Often, children felt responsible for the divorce and experienced a profound sense of loss and confusion. The major goal realized in this practicum was that divorcing parents learned to channel their anger into more positive emotions and learned how to communicate effectively with their children. The following tools were developed for this practicum: (1) a parent survey; (2) 12 interactive work classes for divorcing parents; (3) appropriate handouts; (4) a personal information form for children of divorced parents; and (5) a parent informal interview form. Analysis of the data demonstrated that the divorcing parents became more aware of coping skills during this transition period and were able to direct their frustration toward positive outlets. In addition, there was a decrease in the number of anger incidents directed at their children. (Author/MSF)

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ED 371 285

Improving Parental Coping Skills During the Adjustment Period: A Model Divorce Education Program

by

Faye Abood

Cluster 56

A Practicum I Report Presented to the
Ed.D. Program in Child and Youth Studies
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Education

NOVA SOUTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY

1994

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PRACTICUM APPROVAL SHEET

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This practicum report was submitted by Faye Abood under the direction of the adviser listed below. It was submitted to the Ed.D. Program in Child and Youth Studies and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Nova University.

Approved:

June 7, 1994
Date of Final Approval of Report

June S. Delano
June Delano, Ph.D., Adviser

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to extend my sincere thanks to Dr. June Delano, my adviser, who offered constructive suggestions and advice through the process from intention to implementation.

In preparation of this practicum, the writer received invaluable editing assistance from Dr. Joy Gray. Extensive support and proofreading of the first three chapters came from Cluster 56-Phil Smith, Tom Ryan, Kathi Lippert, and Betty Johnston. Dr. Ellen Stern, co-oordinator of Cluster 56, provided unlimited patience and encouragement. To all of these goes my deepest gratitude.

I am pleased to acknowledge my further indebtedness to Debby Goeble, my verifier, for generative suggestions and comments.

Finally, I would like to thank my family, especially my husband and youngest son Brandon, who have encouraged me and offered unfailing support throughout the process of the practicum.

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ABSTRACT

Improving Parental Coping Skills During the Adjustment Period: A Model Divorce Education Program. Abood, Faye, 1994: Practicum Report, Nova Southeastern University, Ed.D. Program in Child and Youth Studies. Divorcing Parents/Child-Rearing Skills/Problem Solving; Conflict Management/Related Issues/Resources.

The design of this practicum was to address the problem of parents obtaining a divorce who did not possess coping skills and sometimes misdirected their frustration and anger at their children. Often, children felt responsible for the divorce and experienced a profound sense of loss and confusion.

The major goal of this practicum was that divorcing parents learned to channel their anger into more positive emotions and learned how to communicate effectively with their children.

The writer developed the following tools for this practicum: (1) parent survey; (2) twelve interactive work classes for divorcing parents; (3) appropriate handouts; (4) personal information form for their children; and a (5) parent informal interview form.

Analysis of the data demonstrated that the divorcing parents became more aware of coping skills during this transition period and were able to direct their frustration toward positive outlets. In addition, there was a decrease in the number of anger incidents directed at their children.

Permission Statement

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Description of Community

The community where this practicum took place was in a large metropolitan district of 1,600,000 persons. The city was the largest one in the state whose economy was historically based on industry such as steel mills, chemical plants, and clothing factories. Bordering to the south of a main waterway enabled this community the advantage of being a major port, and its 10,000 factories continued to be a major factor in the district's economy. The market area has experienced substantial growth in income the past 10 years, and greater increases are expected for the next decade.

Relative to the large city were large city problems: slums, poverty, gangs, and crime abound. Unemployment was common among the city's black minority group because of limited work skills coupled with minimal education. The city's population was declining with more people moving to safer, upscale suburbs.

The educational system included 180 public schools, 250 private schools, 3 colleges, and 3 universities. Of

negative impact on the public school system was a lack of cooperativeness between the school board and the city council.

The adults involved in this proposal were predominantly Caucasian parents who were obtaining a divorce; however, the adults, as a whole, represented a total community in relation to specific characteristics such as race, occupation, education, and income. They might have been experiencing one of the most transitional periods of their lives -- divorce adjustment. The median family income was approximately $40,000 a year, and the mean home value had been estimated at $95,000.

Writer's Work Setting and Role

The writer is a therapist in private practice, which includes a physician and four other therapists, situated in a suite of offices in a high-rise medical building.

As a therapist, the writer's counseling interests focus on divorce, abuse, and co-dependency issues. The writer's role is to work with children and parents who are referred by the court system, Human Services, and other referral sources. Moreover, the case load varies from one-on-one sessions to group counseling sessions with not more than ten clients in a group. The writer provides therapy in 50 minute sessions with adults, and 30 minute sessions with children. Play therapy is often utilized

while working with children ages 3-11.

As a therapist, responsibilities included listening to clients, being non-judgmental, clarifying attitudes and feelings, giving unconditional positive regard, understanding empathetically of the clients' internal frame of reference, providing feedback, and facilitating the clients toward positive decision making and problem solving.

Qualifications for the writer's present position include a Master's degree in Psychology and Personnel. In the past, the writer has taught gifted students at the middle and high school level, directed school plays, and chaired fund raising events. As a guidance counselor, she has initiated and implemented three programs which have addressed the needs of students at the high school level: the Sex Education Program, a mentoring program, and the Community Speaker's Program. These programs were adopted as permanent programs in the school system.

Currently, the writer is a consultant and member of the Advisory Council for a residential care facility for children and adolescents and also confers with psychologists and social workers on the planning, implementation, and evaluation of community programs. Being a child advocate, the writer maintains contact with representatives of the school, correctional, and welfare systems.

CHAPTER II

STUDY OF THE PROBLEM

Problem Description

Parents who were obtaining a divorce did not possess coping skills and sometimes misdirected their frustration and anger at their children. This misdirected anger adversely affected the children in a myriad of ways. The children felt responsible for the divorce and experienced a profound sense of loss and confusion. This inevitably led to a deterioration of the relationship between parent and child.

Therapists within the district did not utilize a practical and pragmatic educational program to teach coping skills and practical problem solving skills to divorcing parents. Furthermore, during divorce counseling, criteria for any strategies for mitigating the detrimental effects of a divorce were ill-defined. Thus, adequate and relevant information regarding the major issues occurring during divorce such as child rearing and child visiting were inadequate. Consequently, parents were not being taught how to cope without creating conflict that might damage their child's self esteem. Without a frame of reference, divorcing parents were left

to cope on their own.

Furthermore, parents who were obtaining a divorce were resentful and angry. Oftentimes this anger and, possibly, abuse were directed at their children. Without effective support services and resources, parents did not possess the skills to eliminate these harmful behaviors.

The problem was that divorcing parents did not possess coping skills and misdirected their anger. The consequences resulted in creating a mileau which contributed to the suffering of the children.

Problem Documentation

Evidence that this problem existed was provided by divorcing parents and their children. In 20 parent surveys (see Appendix A), 15 adults stated that they sometimes became very angry and lashed out at their children. In addition, all parents stated that they would like to have a program that fit their needs; furthermore, all parents agreed that they would like to leave the program with "specific techniques and strategies to take care of our children and ourselves."

In 15 individual questionnaires (see Appendix B), given to children of the divorcing parents, 14 children believed that there was a lot of stress during their parents' divorce and things would be getting worse. All

children, as expressed in the individual questionnaires, alluded to the feeling that their behavior was oftentimes met with anger and rejection by either their mother or their father. All 15 children agreed that their home was not a "happy home" and "hate it when my parents yell."

Also in 10 individual parents' oral interviews (see Appendix C), all indicated the need for support-services and resources that would be effective and affordable. In addition, all parents agreed that adjustment issues were not addressed by the judicial system's legal processes -- it did not educate parents; it merely divorced them.

Causative Analysis

The causes of the problem were multitudinous. Divorcing parents felt that they were under constant stress during the divorce process. The emotional and financial burdens created by the divorce often seemed insurmountable.

Furthermore, divorcing parents were not aware that they were taking out their frustration and anger on their children. The divorcing parents were occupied with their own mourning process, and they did not have the energy to nurture their children. These parents stated that they reacted to situations impulsively rather than approaching problems in a rational manner.

In addition, divorcing parents did not have adequate

coping skills relative to effective communication with their children. The education that most of the parents received never included problem-solving or coping skills as part of a school's curriculum.

Generally, parents who were obtaining a divorce did not have sufficient knowledge of resources available for additional help. Support services and resources were neither coordinated nor provided relevant and adequate information regarding the critical issues which needed to be addressed relating to the divorce process.

Relationship of the Problem to the Literature

A review of the literature revealed and supported the need to address the issues of adults obtaining a divorce while concurrently addressing the issues regarding their children.

Children often demonstrated a lack of self-esteem coupled with low academic achievement during the transitional period of their parents' divorce (Belsky, 1990; Rollins and Thomas, 1979). According to Kurdek (1993) "children's adjustment to divorce is most consistently affected by the level of interparental conflict and the level of parental adjustment" (p. 39). Amato (1992) found that adults who were previously children of divorce experienced more problems associated with low self-esteem than adults of two-parent families.

Furthermore, Amato (1993) indicated that "children of divorce, on the average, score slightly lower on indicators of well-being than do children raised in continuously intact two-parent families" (p. 53). The severity of the conflict between the parents, which was inadvertently experienced by the child, was often in direct proportion to the degree that the child was impacted (Amato, 1993).

As a result, single-parenting maximized the possibility of anti-social behavior for boys at-risk. Due to a lack of self-esteem, these boys at-risk often exhibited acting-out behaviors such as fighting, swearing, and stealing (Zill, 1983). The overwhelming feeling that many of these children harbored was anger toward the father. The rationale was that the children blamed the father for the breakup of the marriage. In addition, the father, oftentimes, not only divorced his spouse but his children as well. This was reflected by the father's abandoning the children and not accepting his responsibility in child support. Accordingly, shame, confusion, anxiety, and anger were enmeshed in the child's everyday life. The child's anger was often dispelled in acting-out ways: being unmotivated in school, engaging in sexual activity, and becoming involved in delinquent behavior (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Furthermore, Amato (1993) asserted that, "Divorce does not ruin the life of

every child it touches, but we cannot assume that its consequences are always benign" (p. 53).

Children were not the only ones who were affected by the divorce. It has been noted that divorcing parents were mutually affected by the divorce process. Astone and McLanahan (1991) reported that there was a significant lack of adequate programs which addressed the needs of divorcing parents. In the past, the physical proximity to their immediate families provided divorcing parents with opportunities for support and assistance. During the past decade, however, the demographic change (closeness of immediate family) had shifted significantly: the proximity of immediate family rarely existed, which has adversely affected the resources available for divorcing parents (Jayakody, Chatters & Taylor, 1993). Since there were no guidelines for the new family pattern that divorce created, the status of the children remained in limbo.

The availability of resources and the effects of divorce were inextricably linked. Amato (1993) posited that effects of divorce would be negative if the children had limited exposure to resources. However, if the children were provided with sufficient resources, the effects of their parents' divorce would be neutral (Amato, 1993).

In addition, women would possibly be more protected if resources would be known and available. Shepard (1992)

determined that many wives who were abused by their husbands before the divorce continued to be victimized by their ex-spouse after the divorce. Therefore, a failure existed within the court systems to provide adequate protection to mothers seeking child-custody arrangements (Shepard, 1992).

Likewise, Ferreiro (1990) suggested that the absence of addressing the critical issues such as child-custody and economic hardships might increase the frequency of additional parental conflict resulting in poorer parent-child relationships. Allen (1993) also underscored the need to address relevant issues regarding child-rearing concerns. She emphasized the importance of understanding the child's need to feel safe and secure.

Failure to make payments for child support or the absence of the father (abandonment) resulted in detrimental consequences for the child. The child, then, became a victim. Demo (1992) agreed that the child's adjustment to divorce was critically affected by his father's role in meeting his responsibilities, such as providing economic support and being involved in his child's life after the divorce. As Atkin and Rubin (1976) reported, "... many a harsh custody fight ... money -- its retention or expenditure -- becomes the handiest tool for striking at the enemy" (p. 95). This behavior and attitude reflected the lack of positive coping skills that

the parents exhibited during the time of their divorce; consequently, it also reflected poor psychological adjustment (Amato & Keith, 1991b).

As a result of the divorcing parents' poor psychological adjustment, children were often treated as pawns in a custody battle. Moreover, the children suffered psychological pain and extreme distress. Therefore, it was crucial that both parents expressed increased sensitivity in the welfare of the child (McKay, Rogers, Blades & Gosse, 1984).

CHAPTER III

ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES AND EVALUATION INSTRUMENTS

Goals and Expectations

The goal was that divorcing parents would be able to channel their anger into more positive emotions and would learn how to communicate effectively with their children; therefore, their children would not suffer permanent emotional and physical difficulties.

Expected Outcomes

The following outcomes would be expected as a result from the implementation of the divorce education program:

1. Ten of the 15 divorcing parents would reduce their anger incidents directed at their children as indicated on a parent survey (see Appendix A), by answering "no" on numbers 5, 6, 7, 8 and 11.
2. All 15 parents would show an awareness of child-rearing skills by being able to verbally express the basic needs of the child as noted by observation and an informal interview (see Appendix C), by answering correctly (90% agreement level) on numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6.

3. All 15 parents would be able to demonstrate problem-solving techniques when communicating with their children by being able to identify the triggers for their anger, and demonstrate the ability to utilize constructive outlets for dealing with that anger as indicated by observation and an informal interview (see Appendix C), by answering correctly (90% agreement level) on numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6.
4. All 15 parents would be able to identify resources and support systems as indicated by observation and an informal interview (see Appendix C), by answering correctly (90% agreement level) on number 8.
5. All 15 parents would be able to demonstrate how to apply coping skills in their everyday life, as noted by observation and an informal interview (see Appendix C), by answering correctly (90% agreement level), on numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8.
6. Thirteen out of 14 children of divorcing parents would be able to express their needs and feelings in a spontaneous manner as indicated on a questionnaire form (see Appendix B), by answering on numbers 3, 6, and 8 in positive

statements.

Measurement of Outcomes

Parent surveys, interviews, and observations would be the evaluation tools used to measure these expected outcomes. During the last week of implementation (12 weeks), a survey (see Appendix A) would be administered to 15 parents obtaining a divorce. The distribution of the survey would be initiated by the writer. Any explanations or clarifications required by the participants concerning the survey would be given to the writer. The time frame for the administering and collecting of the survey would be 30 minutes. The survey was divided into three sections and included topics that were intended to increase the coping skills of divorcing parents. The survey consisted of topics which related to various concerns of divorcing parents such as: anger management, child-rearing, discipline, stress releasers, holidays, emergencies, geographically acceptable locations, Santa Claus syndrome, step-families, community resources, and support systems.

The parents would be surveyed concerning questions relative to their understanding of handling certain feelings and emotions. The writer would measure the parents' awareness of the above stated concepts by observing and listening to the parents' verbalized

explanations. The writer would record the evaluation on an interview form (see Appendix C), and note any significant improvement in the divorcing parents' awareness of concepts. Also, any additional input or feedback from the divorcing parents would be recorded and shared with all participants.

Fourteen children of divorcing parents would be given a questionnaire (see Appendix B) to complete at the end of the implementation of the divorce education program (12 weeks). The writer would administer the questionnaire during a one-on-one session with each child in order to have the optimal attention of the child while he was completing the form. The writer would provide any explanations of the questionnaire initially and throughout the completion of the questionnaire as required by the child. The time frame for completing the questionnaire was approximately 20-25 minutes.

CHAPTER IV

SOLUTION STRATEGY

Discussion and Evaluation of Possible Solutions

Parents who were obtaining a divorce did not possess coping skills and sometimes misdirected their frustration and anger at their children. This misdirected anger adversely affected the children in a myriad of ways. The children felt responsible for the divorce and experienced a profound sense of loss and confusion. This inevitably led to a deterioration of the relationship between the parent and child. Divorcing parents were not provided with a divorce education program that addressed their needs during the transitional period of divorce. Reviewing the literature enabled the writer to reflect on various solutions for consideration.

Amato (1992) designed a general model of issues that must be addressed during the period of divorce adjustment. Criteria of a parenting program had to recognize the inclusion of resources for the child. A major resource for the child should encompass the emotional support and guidance from both parents. In addition, socioeconomic

support provided by the parents would help the child's need to feel secure.

Kurdek (1981) noted that a more comprehensive model on which to base the criteria of a parenting program should comprise the gender and the developmental stages of the child. Moreover, aspects that would enhance and support a comprehensive program would be the awareness of the transitional events of the child, such as moving, loss of contact with friends and grandparents, and the possible change of school systems (Wolchik, Sandler, Beaver, & Fogas, 1985).

Other innovation solutions gleaned from the literature included developing community parenting centers (Linden & McFarland, 1993); establishing neighborhood families (Fiske, McFarlin, Nelson, Sherman, 1993); and providing federally funded parent support centers (Frenza, 1993).

Community parenting centers could offer positive parenting classes to divorcing parents to enable them to make informed and intelligent decisions concerning child-care issues. The results of the positive parenting classes "are really effective - not only in preventing child abuse and raising the quality of parenting in their communities, but also in actually reducing children's hospital admission rates due to injuries" (Demause, 1993, p. 3).

According to Flicker (1993) the need to provide parent education to divorcing parents was essential, due to the fact that one-half of all the children would be living in a single parent home by the time the child was sixteen years old. Adequate supervision must be provided for these children, either through adult leadership or mentorship (Goldstein, Apter, & Harootunian, 1984). Positive parenting programs that could be beneficial for the single parent would consist of classes that provided information, facilitated discussion, and fielded questions addressing their child's development and adjustment (Flicker, Bloom, Fraad, & Frenza, 1993).

Donnelly and Finkelhor (1992) suggested that children would be able to cope with their parents' divorce if they received appropriate help through a supportive system. Smilansky (1992) maintained that "in order to develop to their full potential, they (children of divorce) need longitudinal support by informed and caring adults, at home and in school" (p. 1). Furthermore, Shepard (1992) referred to the utilization of support systems as vital for women who were victims of abuse.

Collective child-care, Fraad (1993) contended, would enable single parents to cherish their children instead of feeling overwhelmed by them. She suggested that provisions could be made for the single parents' needs: safe housing, public child-care, and quality care. Fiske

(1993) underscored that if the responsibility of raising children was collectively shared by the community, the community had to include committed support systems.

Networks of community support could provide opportunities to divorcing parents and their children for recovery from the traumatic effects of a divorce. Moreover, "that is why parent support groups, parenting centers, and parenting education should be introduced universally and even mandated by law" (Frenza et al., 1993, p. 65).

Description of Selected Solution

The writer, while considering the solutions revealed by the literature, noted that a prime area of concern of divorcing parents was to receive information and guidance on child-care issues. Defined by the problems of divorcing parents that the literature uncovered, the writer sought to implement a divorce education program to meet their needs. Therefore, the underlying premise of the divorce education program would incorporate the tenets of Fiske, McFarlin, Nelson and Sherman (1993) in which they stated that parent education "must be firmly centered on a base of absolute nonviolence and respect toward children" (p. 26).

The program's format would be directed toward

providing an informative program to meet the needs of the divorcing parents, modifying the divorcing parents' objectional behavior, and increasing the child's capacity to live in a more secure and loving home.

Using exercises and group process, the writer would focus on issues of anger management, stress releasers, child-rearing concerns, step-families, mediation, community resources, and support systems. These issues had to be considered the highest priority in parent education classes, according to Frenza, (1993) in order to prevent child abuse. Thus, didactic presentations, videotapes and small group discussions would be utilized to address these issues and to maximize the participants' learning of positive coping skills.

Various role-playing methods would also be demonstrated to learn problem-solving techniques and strategies. Exploring the impact of divorce, the divorcing parents would learn coping mechanisms that could be used with their children. The dynamics and effects of the changes that occurred in the family constellation would also be discussed. Pertinent handouts would be provided to enable the participants to increase their understanding of parental coping skills.

The implementation of the program also included Demause's (1993) suggestion that parenting education classes should include a list of community resources to

decrease the escalating family violence. Fraad (1993) underscored this recommendation when she reported that the advantages of utilizing community resources were that they provided immediate information, and served as a source for emotional support.

Report of Action Taken

The steps to implement the divorce education program were a systematic progression designed to be pragmatically focused. Group sessions were held weekly, which focused on the potential impact of their divorce on their offspring, increasing the parental awareness of their children's needs.

Week 1 The writer provided the divorcing parents with a comprehensive overview of the divorce education program by discussing the agenda and the activities that would be presented. Four guidelines were given at the beginning concerning the classes: (1) confidentiality, not only on the part of the writer but also the participants; (2) use of first names only; (3) use of explanations which worked for them, but not advice to others; and (4) a commitment to attend every class. The writer then requested a list of questions or issues that participants would like addressed in reference to the topic "Improving Parental Coping Skills During the Adjustment Period: A Model Divorce Education Program" and had their concerns written on the flip chart. The basic needs of the child

during the divorce process were introduced through a video presentation entitled "Surviving Divorce." After viewing the video, participants discussed how to fulfill the basic needs of the child. The writer had referred to Frenza (1993) for topic suggestions for the divorce education program.

Week 2 The writer facilitated intergroup discussion with divorcing parents, so that they could explore and share their child-rearing skills; furthermore, the discussion focused on the existing coping skills of the divorcing parents. The writer then distributed a handout in which participants labeled their generational pattern of behavior (genogram). While they completed their responses, the writer stated that these charts would not be handed in, but were to be for their own use. Upon their completion of the "generational behavior" chart, the writer indicated discussion that behavior and response to conflict/problems often relate to and can be traced back to what was taught to them in their family of origin. Patterns of existing parenting styles -- authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive -- were addressed. These three parenting styles, which were illustrated on the flip chart and handout, were discussed in depth by all participants and the writer.

Week 3 The writer defined the critical need of nurturing the child's self-esteem. Handouts which

illustrated various ways to nurture a child's self-esteem were distributed to the divorcing parents. Divorcing parents then labeled a handout which illustrated how they could nurture their child's self-esteem. All participants role-played common problems with children (homework/grades and chores) in various scenarios. Bolstering and lowering self-esteem responses toward the child were discussed and enacted.

Week 4 A parent-child scenario was role-played with the writer and participants, which demonstrated effective communication with their children. Steps of effective communication were written on the flip chart and discussed. A handout of effective communication was then distributed to all participants and reviewed. The writer also illustrated negative discipline by an interactive exercise with the divorcing parents. Participants than discussed effective discipline methods, which were listed on a flip chart and handout provided by the writer. A handout was presented to all participants that addressed the steps to an effective family counsel meeting, which was encouraged by the writer to be held weekly. Finally, a review was given by the writer on the previous concepts (child-rearing concerns) covered during weeks one through four.

Week 5 The participants identified the triggers of their anger by utilizing a flip chart. The divorcing

parents listed clues to recognizing personal anger responses. The divorcing parents also responded to their experiences of dealing with conflict: resorting to non-communication and/or power plays on the flip chart. To learn how to defuse potentially explosive encounters, the Pop Game, a role-playing activity, was experienced by all participants. Also time out responses to stop the escalation of anger were rehearsed by all participants. These techniques were listed on a handout that all participants received.

Week 6 Participants were given constructive outlets of dealing with their anger through role-playing in conjunction with a follow-up discussion period. Participants also learned how to generate options when conflicts occurred. Additionally, they learned how to control anger (Frenza, 1993) and to reduce impulsive behavior. Handouts illustrating conflict management were distributed by the writer. Conflict management skills were practiced by all participants.

Week 7 Participants continued to discuss constructive outlets of dealing with their anger. Strategies to neutralize negative feelings were offered by the writer. To address the issues of managing anger, emotional tension, and confrontation, the writer assisted the participants in role-playing positive approaches to a conflict situation. A question and answer period followed

the issue of how to resolve disagreements regarding parenting.

Week 8 During week eight, the writer initiated discussion of positive outlets for stress. Stress releasers were identified and written on the flip chart by the participants. The divorcing parents reflected on their behavior and learned practical outlets for stress. The divorcing parents practiced (through role-playing) coping skills that were helpful during this transitional period of their lives. At the end of this session, the writer reviewed the 2nd month's concepts of anger management with the participants.

Week 9 Guidelines for dealing with stepfamilies were explained. The writer elicited discussion toward active problem-solving with topics regarding: holidays, emergencies, geographically acceptable locations, and the Santa Claus syndrome. Learning assertive problem-solving skills were reviewed and reinforced by identifying, predicting, and preparing for difficult encounters. Assertive responses were utilized to deal with confrontations.

Week 10 During this week, the writer initiated the discussion on the topics of community resources (Demause's, 1993), and support systems (Fraad's, 1993). A list of additional resources was given to the participants. The writer also involved all the

participants in interactive activities which reviewed all the previous weeks' concepts.

Week 11 The writer facilitated intergroup discussion in reference to the topic of child custody. The writer encouraged the participants to consider the process of mediation. A brief discussion period explained the process of mediation, and a handout was distributed regarding the topic. The basic needs of the child were also reviewed. The divorcing parents focused on how to incorporate the divorce education program's coping skills into their present day lives while addressing the issues of having a chemically dependent ex-spouse or an abusive ex-spouse. Additional handouts were given that would be helpful in dealing with ex-spouse abuse and chemical dependency. Each participant then identified the steps to the various concepts that were discussed during the previous weeks' sessions. A checklist was completed by the writer and a copy of the checklist was given to each participant.

Week 12 An informal, group experience with divorcing parents focused on how to incorporate the divorce education program's coping skills into their present day lives. In addition, the divorcing parents were given a survey at the end of the implementation period to determine if their episodes of anger outbursts toward their children had been reduced. The writer also

administered a questionnaire to the children of divorcing parents at the end of the implementation period to determine any improved change in their feelings of emotional turmoil. Concurrently, the writer met with the multi-disciplinary team to evaluate the results of the divorce education program. A comprehensive review of the results of the divorce education program were recorded and shared with all participants of the program during an informal meeting or by phone contact.

Throughout the 12 weeks of the practicum, the writer developed and distributed to the participants various original handouts that dealt with Child Rearing Skills, Conflict Management, and Support Services and Resources.

Unexpected Events and Roadblocks

During the implementation of the practicum, three unexpected events and one roadblock occurred. First, a meeting had to be postponed due to inclement weather which, consequently, closed three major highways. Therefore, the implementation was one week behind schedule.

Second, a couple who were separated and were in the process of seeking a divorce decided to make a cooperative effort to work on their relationship. They had made the

commitment to learn the steps necessary to communicate with each other effectively. At the same time, they showed an eagerness to respect and become aware of each other's needs and feelings through constructive problem-solving techniques. They stated that they felt they were "problem-solving impaired." Given the presence of supportive participants within the group, this couple seemed to inspire the group's determination to learn and enact the coping techniques as they proceeded through their divorce proceedings. Subsequently, a very supportive atmosphere among the participants had occurred. In addition, this couple's willingness to work together stimulated a concrete effort of the participants' willingness to be cognizant of the potential impact of their impending divorce on their children.

Thirdly, during the eighth week, a friend (who was not initially in the class) accompanied the divorcing parent in the room. Before the class began, the writer acknowledged her presence but asked her politely if she could wait outside the conference room in the lobby. It was explained to her that because of the composition and nature of the class, any additional person might deter from the progress that these individuals are making. Offering her a place to read, wait and have a snack, the class resumed on schedule.

One roadblock occurred during the 11th week of

implementation -- a power outage. Rather than wait for the lights to go on or change the schedule to the forwarding week, the writer used this problem as an experience in how to problem-solve. While sitting in the dark, the participants practiced the essential problem-solving skills in order to deal effectively with an unexpected event.

CHAPTER V

RESULTS, DISCUSSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Results

Parents who were obtaining a divorce did not possess coping skills and sometimes misdirected their frustration and anger at their children. This misdirected anger adversely affected the children in a myriad of ways. The children felt responsible for the divorce and experienced a profound sense of loss and confusion. This inevitably led to a deterioration of the relationship between the parent and child. However, therapists had not utilized a practical and pragmatic educational program to meet the needs of the divorcing parents.

This practicum involved 15 divorcing parents and 14 children. This program gave divorcing parents an opportunity to address critical issues of divorce as well as learn specific techniques of how to resolve its problems. Participants were also provided with information in three major areas: (1) child-rearing issues; (2) problem-solving/conflict management; and (3) support and resources.

The results obtained in this practicum are presented for each outcome as follows:

1. Ten of the 15 divorcing parents will reduce their anger incidents directed at their children as indicated on a parent survey (see Appendix A), by answering "no" on numbers 5, 6, 7, 8, and 11.

Table 1

Percentages of Parents Responding "No" on Statements 5, 6, 7, 8, and 11.

Statement #	Percentage
5	73%
6	93%
7	80%
8	87%
11	100%

2. All 15 parents will show an awareness of child-rearing skills by being able to verbally express the basic needs of the child as noted by observation and an informal interview (see Appendix C), by answering correctly (90% agreement level) on numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6.

Table 2

Percentages of Parents Responding "No" on Statements 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6.

Statement #	Percentage
1	93%
2	93%
3	93%
4	93%
5	100%
6	100%

3. All 15 parents will be able to demonstrate problem-solving techniques when communicating with their children by being able to identify the triggers for their anger, and demonstrate the ability to utilize constructive outlets for dealing with that anger as indicated by observation and an informal interview (see Appendix C) by answering correctly (90% agreement level) on numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6.

Table 3

Percentages of Parents Responding "No" on Statements 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6.

Statement #	Percentage
1	93%
2	93%
3	93%
4	93%
5	100%
6	100%

4. All 15 parents will be able to identify resources and support systems as indicated by observation and an informal interview (see Appendix C), by answering correctly (90% agreement level) on number 8.

Table 4

Percentages of Parents Answering Correctly on Statement 8.

Statement #	Percentage
8	100%

5. All 15 parents will be able to demonstrate how to apply coping skills in their everyday life, as noted by observation and an informal interview (see Appendix C), by answering correctly (90% agreement level), on numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8.

Table 5

Percentages of Parents Answering Correctly on Statements 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8.

Statement #	Percentage
1	100%
2	93%
3	93%
4	93%
5	93%
6	100%
7	100%
8	100%

6. Thirteen out of 14 children of divorcing parents will be able to express their needs and feelings in a spontaneous manner as indicated on a questionnaire form (see Appendix B), by answering on numbers 3, 6, and 8 in positive statements.

Table 6

Percentages of Children Answering Positively on Statements 3, 6, and 8.

Statement #	Percentage
3	92%
6	62%
8	31%

Discussion

In reference to the first outcome, the responses were higher than expected; therefore, the first outcome was achieved. Specifically, item number five on the survey asked whether parents felt a sense of guilt or shame about their reaction when relating to their child. As Table 1 indicates, divorcing parents (73%) noted that they had not. Item number six states, "Sometimes I feel that I am yelling more at my children." Responses to this statement indicated in Table 1 that 93% of the parents are not yelling more at their children, but using more effective ways to relate to their children. Item number seven on the survey "I get angry often" yielded an 80% negative response, according to Table 1. Likewise, item eight which stated, "Sometimes I feel unable to handle anger,"

resulted in 87% of the divorcing parents answering with a "no." Responses to item 11 "Sometimes I 'put people down' when I'm angry...belittle" yielded a high percentage of 100% of parents answering "no." These response rates indicated that expectations for the first outcome were not only met but surpassed. Moreover, the divorcing parents not only reduced their anger incidents directed at their children but felt confident with applying practical methods/techniques in resolving child-related problems.

The second outcome's responses were higher than expected; therefore, the second outcome was achieved. Item number one on the informal interview asked whether the parent could identify who owns the problem, the parent or the child? The response rate (see Table 2) yielded a 93% of the parents answering correctly. Responses to item two (93% of the parents) which asked "With whom is this behavior interfering directly?" indicated that parents will be able to demonstrate their knowledge of identifying an important component necessary for problem-solving. Parents responded with a 93% to items numbered three and four when asked related questions such as: "Who is making the issue or making the complaint?" and Whose purposes are being thwarted?" All of the participants agreed that items number five and six were "very easy to answer" when asked, "Can you name some "I" messages, and "Discuss some logical consequences for misbehavior." The participants'

responses to these two questions indicated a high percentage of 100% and 100% respectively.

In the writer's journal entry, a comment was noted from one of the divorcing parents "the comfortable environment, the demonstrations, and discussions were very conducive for mastery of child-rearing skills."

In addition, outcome number three's responses were higher than expected; therefore, outcome number three was achieved. Alluding to the same items (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6) on the Personal Information Form as outcome number two, Table 3 indicated comparable high percentages from the divorcing parents. These high percentages confirmed that the divorcing parents were aware of problem-solving techniques utilizing constructive outlets for dealing with their anger.

In reference to outcome number four, results of the informal interview and by observation (see Table 4) were higher than expected: subsequently, outcome number four was achieved. All parents indicated familiarity with resources and support systems as well as specific ones they would be willing to use.

Responses to outcome number five (see Table 5) were higher than expected; therefore, outcome five was achieved. Results of this outcome indicated that parents were aware of methods of how to apply coping skills in their everyday life. Referring to item number seven on the

informal interview "How has your handling of problems with your child changed since taking the course? Has the course made a difference? If, how?", comments were all very positive such as, "I never knew I would know so much about child-rearing skills." Participants also remarked, "When is Part II?" "Full of practical, useful information." One father, in particular, reiterated a scenario that happened at his home. He stated that before taking the divorce education course, he would have berated and belittled his son for receiving an "F" on his report card. But he said that he thought, "What the heck, I'll try what I learned." He said he pointed out where his son improved in his classes, identified his strengths and praised him, and then referred to the F, by saying in a calm tone, "Now, Jason, what do you think could be done to improve on this F, because I know you can." The father commented that he thinks his son at first looked at him in bewilderment, knowing how his father had reacted to poor grades in the past. They generated solutions and came up with a plan and a weekly time to evaluate progress.

However, outcome number six responses (see Table 6) were lower than expected; therefore, outcome six wasn't achieved. Referring to item number three on the "Child Personal Information Form, 92% of the children answered "My mother ____" in a positive manner. Moreover, item number six which stated "My father ___" yielded a rate

of 62% of the children answering in a positive way. Item number eight which asked "My home is _____" resulted in a very low percentage of 31% of children indicating a manner that was positive. The writer felt that these low percentages might reflect the turmoil in the child's mind concerning the confusion about the changes that were occurring during his/her parents' divorce.

It is noteworthy that the latest research has indicated that divorce has a major impact on the child's well-being (Furstenberg and Nord, 1987). Stressful life changes abound, often compounded by the refusal of the father to support his children financially (Weitzman, 1985). Often, young children blame themselves for interparental conflict (Grynch & Fineham, 1990). Moreover, maladjusted parents increase problems for their children if the children are forced to take sides (Johnston, Kline & Tschann, 1989).

The writer, noted in her journal that while observing interactions between parent and child, a five year old child was holding his father's hand and walking toward the mother. The child then grabbed his mother's hand and tried to join the father and mother's hands together. This observation underscored the belief that most children feel that their parents will be getting back together, or hoping that they will.

However, in order to lessen these stressors on the

children of divorcing parents, an education course should be mandatory, which teaches parents how to safeguard the welfare of their children (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1993).

In sum, the writer implemented a divorce education program whose focus was for parents to become aware of specific attitudes and behaviors that would harm their children. Three major areas that were addressed were child-rearing, problem-solving/conflict management, and support and resources. Five of the six outcomes were achieved, which indicated that the divorcing parents benefitted from this program. The sixth outcome, the writer felt, targeted a need for a program to be implemented specifically for children of divorcing parents.

Positive comments, observations noting significant improvement, and outcome results were all indicators of this practicum's success.

Recommendations

The following modifications in the divorce education program are recommended, in order to maximize the practicum's effectiveness:

1) Divorcing parents will be given more techniques with emphasis on how to take care of themselves. Possibly, two sessions focusing on this topic would be conducted rather

than just part of one.

2) Given the restriction of a three month time frame to implement this practicum, the sixth outcome, which states that "Thirteen out of 14 children of divorcing parents will be able to express their needs and feelings in a spontaneous manner as indicated on a questionnaire form (see Appendix B), by answering 3, 6, and 8 in positive statements" should be deleted. Involving the children, would have been more appropriate in an eight or nine month practicum.

Dissemination

Disseminating the results of this practicum can be a valuable resource for divorcing parents during this transitional period of their lives to learn practical coping skills, which would directly strengthen the parent-child relationship. The establishing of the divorce education program was effective in addressing the needs of the parents. The administrative staff of a church and the professional staff of a residential care center expressed interest in the presentation of the divorce education program. Consequently, the writer plans on presenting the divorce education program in several parishes in their "Series for Parents" seminars/workshops. In addition, the writer's intent is to disseminate this program to

interested teachers, therapists and community members. Furthermore, the program will be disseminated to organizations such as churches, schools, and private agencies.

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Appendices

Appendices A

May 22, 1993

Dear Participant,

I would like to ask you to participate in a survey given to parents getting a divorce. This study's aim is to target what issues will help ease the parents' and child's adjustment to a possible stressful experience.

Any information given by you will be confidential and used only as a helping tool in determining what topics should be covered in class.

Please complete this survey and return it to me. Your participation is very important. Thank you for your time and effort.

Sincerely,

Faye Abood, M.A.
Doctoral Student

PARENTS WHO ARE DIVORCING SURVEY

The following survey is given to address the needs of parents who are getting a divorce. The stated issues are ones that frequently 'come up' during a divorce. Parents who are getting a divorce are being asked to complete this questionnaire.

The questionnaire is divided into three sections. Section I asks you to identify what personal feelings concern you. Section II asks for you to identify specific topics that you would like addressed. Section III asks you to state what additional concerns or topics concerning the divorce that you would like to discuss. Please complete all sections. Thank you.

SECTION I

Directions: Indicate your response to each statement by checking ( ) on the following indicating a yes or no answer.

1. Sometimes my child is experiencing behavioral problems at school. Yes _____ No _____
2. Sometimes my child is experiencing learning problems at school. Yes _____ No _____
3. I have no outlets for stress. Yes _____ No _____
4. I have no where to turn. Yes _____ No _____
5. Sometimes I feel a sense of guilt or shame of my reaction toward my child. Yes _____ No _____
6. Sometimes I feel that I am yelling more at my children. Yes _____ No _____
7. I get angry often. Yes _____ No _____
8. Sometimes I feel unable to handle anger. Yes _____ No _____
9. Sometimes I get into 'down' moods, feeling low. Yes _____ No _____
10. I avoid sharing my feelings with others; I tend to keep silent. Yes _____ No _____

11. Sometimes I 'put people down' when I'm angry...belittle them.
    Yes _____
    No _____
12. I have a good support system.
    Yes _____
    If yes, who? _____
    No _____
13. A child under 12 years of age should never be left at home alone
    Yes _____
    No _____
14. If parents are having trouble coping with their children, they can contact the public children's services.
    Yes _____
    No _____

SECTION II

DIRECTIONS: Please circle any topic you would like to have discussed. Circle as many as you would like.

child rearing

discipline

stress releasers

holidays

emergencies

geographically acceptable locations

Santa Claus syndrome

stepfamilies

community resources

support system

SECTION III

DIRECTIONS: Please list below any suggestions that you have concerning topics about 'raising children of divorce' that you would like to have discussed.

PLEASE ANSWER ALL SECTIONS. THANK YOU

* Any information purported above will be confidential and used only as a helping tool in determining what should be covered in class.

APPENDIX B

CHILD PERSONAL INFORMATION FORM

PIF (Personal Information Form)

PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS

Underline any of the following words or phrases that seem to describe you as a person:

good health	doing good work	liking others
tired	not enough ability	want more friends
pleasant figure	satisfying achievements	leader
lacking energy	not doing enough	follower
well groomed	good ability	one of the group
overweight	can't concentrate	annoyed by others
full of energy	good work habits	many friends
illness	should do better work	alone too much

enjoy life	want to help others
want to be more important	bad habits
pleased with myself	liking boys
want to get even	daydreaming
liking to look ahead	a good person
want more attention	want to get away
confidence in myself	liking girls
unhappy	want to catch up

SENTENCES

Complete the following sentence parts. (For example: I like <u>to walk in the rain</u>). Don't spend too much time thinking about the item, just complete it by writing the first thing that you think of.

1. My brother _____
2. My teacher _____
3. My mother _____
4. My friend _____
5. My sister _____
6. My father _____
7. Boys are _____
8. My home is _____
9. Girls are _____
10. School is _____

APPENDIX C

PARENT INFORMAL INTERVIEW FORM

Informal Interview

Purposes: Discuss a successful method of dealing with parent-child problems.

1. Who owns the problem, you or your child?

2. With whom is this behavior (or situation) interfering directly?

3. Who is making the issue or making the complaint?

4. Whose purposes are being thwarted?

5. Can you name some "I" messages.

6. Let's discuss some logical consequences.

7. How has your handling of problems with your child changed since taking the course?
   Has the course made a difference?
   If so, how?

8. Would you state some resources and support systems that you would be willing to use?

9. Could you give 1 or 2 suggestions to improve the course?

I appreciate your time and effort.
Thank you.